

 CASES FROM THE FIELD

# Finding the Fit: Gender, College Choice, and Consumer Behavior in University Enrollment

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The following qualitative case study uses secondary data from admitted student surveys to understand how women make decisions about college choice at one institution where men outnumber women in enrollment despite relatively even rates of application and acceptance. Findings suggest that women applicants noted affective factors related to familiarity and family when ‘finding the fit’ during their undergraduate institution decision-making. They associated these feelings during their college choice decision-making with the admissions process. By considering these variables, strategic enrollment management professionals may better understand how students make decisions about where to attend college, especially women.

More women are going to college, outpacing men in admissions, persistence, and graduation at institutions across the country. A great deal of research about college choice has considered the changing gender gap in higher education enrollment, noting shifts in gender norms, access to higher education, and labor market expectations for women. As a result, much has been made of a new achievement gap for men, where pundits have suggested that affirmative action is needed to combat the enrollment gap for men (Mintz 2019). As of 2018, 56 percent of incoming undergraduate students were women, and 44 percent were men (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019,

227). This phenomenon can also be seen outside of the United States, including in Canada, Australia, France, the United Kingdom, and Italy (Becker, Hubbard, and Murphy 2010; Evers, Livernois, and Mancuso 2006).

The enrollment shift in the past 40 years has been attributed to higher standardized test scores, higher grades in high school, and increased labor market opportunities for women (Conger 2015; Conger and Dickson 2017; Goldin, *et al.* 2006). Additionally, changing admissions policies (Conger and Dickson 2017), varying state policies related to appropriations, tuition costs, and financial aid (Perna and Titus 2004), and family culture regarding ed-

education have been found to profoundly impact women students. This has contributed to the rise in women's enrollment (Bergerson, Heiselt and Aiken-Wisniewski 2013) despite historical barriers that continue to inhibit access to social, educational, and economic opportunities for women (DiPrete and Buchmann 2013; Jacobs 1996).

This study sought to understand cases where men are the majority of students enrolling in higher education, despite equal rates of application and acceptance. The purpose of this study was to explore the gender reversal at one public, comprehensive, four-year institution, Marathon University (pseudonym). Understanding the college decision-making process is crucial for strategic enrollment managers, admissions counselors, higher education leadership, and policy makers at all institutions, thus the findings reported here have far-reaching implications for future research, policy, and practice. To this end, we qualitatively explored personal student attributes associated with an open-ended accepted student survey and discovered that gender does have implications for the college choice decision-making process, potentially impacting the ways in which strategic enrollment managers consider student decision-making, in light of consumer behavior.

## Background of the Study

In order to gain an understanding of the gender in enrollment in higher education, it is important to note the historical context in which it exists. For the better part of the 20th century, the majority of American colleges and university enrollees were men. In 1970s that gender gap began to close and, in 1988, reverse itself as women consistently outpaced men in enrollment (NCES 1995, 10). Currently women make up just over 56 percent of incoming undergraduates and are projected to maintain that enrollment edge for most of this decade (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019, 227).

To understand how students make decisions about where to attend college, personal and institutional variables should be considered. Personal factors and student characteristics include socioeconomic status, academic aptitude, standardized test scores, gender, ethnicity, proximity to home, and parent education level,

encouragement, and support (Baron and Norman 1992; Bielby, Posselt, Jaquette, and Bastedo 2014; Cosser and du Toit 2002; Hossler, Braxton, and Coopersmith 1989). Institutional characteristics can be both financial and nonfinancial (Hossler, *et al.* 1989). Nonfinancial attributes can include location, reputation, quality of academic programs, and marketing techniques (Hossler, *et al.* 1989). Financial attributes of college choice include the cost of attendance, scholarships, and financial aid opportunities for students (Hossler, *et al.* 1989).

Unlike earlier eras in higher education, the past 40 years have marked the emergence of a new task environment in higher education, one in which it is common for a student to be considered a consumer or academic shopper (Bowden and Wood 2011; Riesman 1980; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Tight 2013; Woodall, Hiller, and Resnick 2014). Factors contributing to this evolving consideration include cost sharing between the student and the institution, massification of higher education, overall enhancement of academics and student life experiences, multiculturalism, and increasing competition amongst institutions to enroll students (Johnstone 2003; Levin 2001; Tight 2013). Additionally, students as consumers want to receive the best value for their money and invest their resources in an institution that provides more benefits than cost and maximizes their utility, therefore contributing to their college choice decision-making (Nokkala, Heller-Schuh, and Paier 2012; Teixeira and Dill 2011; Woodall, *et al.* 2014).

However, current research is inconclusive regarding the impact of gender on college-choice decision-making (Shank and Beasley 1998). Some studies report that gender does not have an impact on college choice (Avery and Hoxby 2004; Cho, Hudley, Lee, Barry, and Kelly 2008; DesJardins, Dundar, and Hendel 1999; Hossler and Stage 1992), while others indicate that women are more inclined to apply to college than men (Weiler 1994). This study was specifically designed to explore how enrollment choice factors differ for men and women.

## Theoretical Framework

When investigating how women and men, as consumers, think, evaluate, and act on their college choice

decisions, two frameworks emerged as the most comprehensive: Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) three stage model of college choice and Blackwell, Miniard, and Engel's (2001) consumer decision process model.

## College Choice Model

Although many theories and models about college choice exist, Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) is most widely used in regards to college choice, and each step of the model has been extensively expanded upon and evaluated throughout the literature. This seminal model of college choice, which includes the stages of predisposition, search, and choice, serves as the primary college choice model for this study, with the primary focus on the final stage of choice.

The first phase, predisposition, includes a student's decision to continue onto college after high school and is often impacted by the student's socioeconomic status, parental influence, and peers (Hossler and Gallagher 1987). In the search phase, students find information about colleges and universities that will ultimately lead them to make a choice on where to attend (Hossler and Gallagher 1987). In this last stage, which served as the focus of this study, students consider and evaluate their choices, ultimately making a decision about which college or university to attend (Hossler and Gallagher 1987; Kim 2004).

## Consumer Behavior Model

Increasingly, institutions of higher learning are forced to operate as businesses with the ultimate goal to graduate as many students as possible at the lowest cost (Kwong 2000; Marginson 2010). As a result, it is important to consider consumer behavior and decision-making in the college choice process. While many models on consumer behavior exist, the Blackwell, Miniard, and Engel (2001) model for consumer behavior, as it relates

to the student as a consumer in the college-making decision process, directly connects to Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model, as seen in Table 1.

Blackwell, *et al.*'s (2001) consumer behavior model is comprised of a seven step process and takes into consideration internal and external factors that influence the decision-making process (Wiese, Van Heerden, and Jordaan 2010). Students who make decisions about where to attend college will undertake all seven stages of the process, including problem and need recognition, search for information, evaluation of different alternatives, selection, consumption, post-selection evaluation, and divestment (Blackwell, *et al.* 2001; Wiese, *et al.* 2010). This model of consumer behavior directly relates to the

**TABLE 1** ➤ Connection between Hossler & Gallagher's (1987) Three-stage College Choice Model and Blackwell, Miniard, and Engel's (2001) Consumer Behavior Model

| College Choice Model | Consumer Behavior Model                                              |
|----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Predisposition       | 1. Problem and Need Recognition                                      |
| Search               | 2. Search for Information<br>3. Evaluation of Different Alternatives |
| Choice               | 4. Selection<br>5. Consumption<br>6. Post-Consumption Evaluation     |
|                      | 7. Divestment                                                        |

three stages in Hossler and Gallagher's (1987) college choice model, as indicated in Table 1. The predisposition stage of college choice coincides with problem and need recognition within the consumer behavior model; the search stage equates to searching for information and then evaluating their choices; and the final choice stage compares to Blackwell, *et al.*'s (2001) selection, consumption, and post-consumption evaluation. The only stage in the consumer behavior model that does not fit directly into the college choice model is divestment, although it could be argued that divestment occurs when a student graduates from the institution and chooses to be an active alum, donate to the institution, and stay involved as a graduate student.

## Gender Implications of Consumer Decision-Making

Gender implications and consumer decision-making has long been studied; however, few inquiries on consumer decision-making refers to college choice explicitly (Palan 2001). Although often inconclusive, research finds that men and women do make decisions differently, including when deciding where to attend college (Wiese, *et al.* 2010).

Although higher education is seen as a service for purchase rather than as a product, women as consumers tend to spend more time enjoying the process of “shopping” and researching options, compared to men who tend to make shopping decisions more quickly (Bakewell and Mitchell 2003; Hayes 2015; Moogan, Baron, and Harris 1999). Men are often seen as more agentic and goal-oriented, while women may be perceived as socially-oriented and communal (Bakewell and Mitchell 2006; Iacobucci and Ostrom 1993). As a result, women are believed to favor relationship formation and are more susceptible to the relationship marketing approach where a relationship between the consumer and the organizational brand occurs (Bowden and Wood 2011; Iacobucci and Ostrom 1993). This attribute coincides with research that suggests that women are more influenced by their parents, value the location, safety, and diversity of a campus, and prefer quality academic programs more than men (Bowden and Wood 2011; Hanson and Litten 1982; Shank and Beasley 1998; Wiese, *et al.* 2010).

When considering loyalty, trust, satisfaction, and commitment—all elements of successful marketing and brand recognition of an institution—women as student-consumers gauge their relationships with the brand and institution when making a college choice decision (Bowden and Wood 2011). As a result, it can be assumed that women would tend to focus more on the relationship formation and connection to a university than men, though men and women both value loyalty (Bowden and Wood 2011). Increased student satisfaction, trust, loyalty, and commitment to the institution can result in a student choosing the institution from their final choice set to attend (Bowden and Wood 2011). Ad-

ditional research indicates that despite women being more inclined to value relationship formation with an institution, both men and women value creating an emotional bond, association, and brand consciousness prior to making a decision about where to attend college. These findings have implications for institutional marketing and communication (Bakewell and Mitchell 2006; Bowden and Wood 2011).

## Methods

This study focuses on first-time, full-time students accepted for the fall 2018 semester at Marathon University, excluding transfer and international students. A case study approach was used because it allows for an in-depth analysis of a single phenomenon that seeks to understand the “why” and “how” of a problem (Yin 2014). Specifically, the study focused on accepted student responses to an open-ended survey. A directed qualitative content analysis was selected in order to explore and highlight student experiences with admissions in light of the theoretical framework (Hsieh and Shannon 2018). Using purposive sampling of all accepted students at Marathon University, four distinct populations were identified: men who enroll, men who do not enroll, women who enroll, and women who do not enroll. In the findings section, frequency of second-cycle codes are shown that are critical to understanding the factors that align with gender and enrollment according to the analysis.

Marathon University is a pseudonym for a mid-size, four-year, public institution in the northeastern region of the United States that is a predominantly white institution. Its main undergraduate campus is suburban and sits in a college town whose economy revolves around the institution. Marathon currently enrolls close to 20,000 total students, including 15,000 undergraduate and more than 3,000 graduate and professional students. Each year, the institution receives about 15,000 applications for undergraduate admission for an incoming class of about 2,500 students. The university offers 100 different undergraduate academic programs and is continuing to increase its master’s, doctoral, and professional degrees in addition to various undergraduate and graduate certificate programs. Popular academic

programs include engineering, education, communications, business, and STEM-related fields. Marathon University's rankings have been climbing in both the region and nation, demonstrating their increasing enrollment, competitiveness, academic programs, and outcomes. The university also recently became a designated research institution, emphasizing an increased interest in the STEM field and gaining national recognition.

An existing, secondary accepted student survey at Marathon University was used for this case study's analysis. The survey was electronically sent to all accepted students for the fall 2018 semester in June and was collected by August. Surveys were e-mailed to the e-mail address that the student used on their admissions application. Survey results were cleaned so names and other identifiable questions that could be linked to a specific participant were removed. This sampling design is single stage, as individual accepted students were contacted directly to complete the survey (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018).

The overall survey included questions that consisted of categorical and continuous scales about timing of the decision, information sources used by the student, influence of the institution and influential people, sense of fit, academics and program of study, and finances and cost. For the purpose of this study, the following open-ended questions were the focus of the qualitative analysis:

- In the final analysis, what ultimately led you to choose Marathon University? (Enrolling students).
- In the final analysis, what led you to decide not to attend Marathon University? (Non-enrolling students).

## Secondary Qualitative Dataset

A total of 10,035 surveys were administered by an outside firm contracted by the university to accepted first-year freshmen students, and 3,208 responses were collected, for an overall response rate of 32 percent. The returned surveys included responses from 676 females who enrolled, 993 females who did not enroll, 817 males who enrolled, and 722 males who did not enroll. Of the 3,208 students who responded, 1,455 replied to the

open-ended survey questions asked, meaning that 45 percent of students who responded to the survey filled out the open-ended questions. Of the 1,455 students who answered the open-ended questions, 599 responses were from non-enrolling students, and 856 were from enrolling students. After the data was cleaned, 1,257 survey responses were analyzed, included from 297 females who enrolled, 288 females who were not enrolled, 257 males who enrolled, and 415 males who did not enroll.

## Participants

All accepted first-time, full-time students in fall 2018 at Marathon University were included as participants of the accepted student survey. Of this population, 3,208 accepted students participated in the overall survey, with 1,455 answering the open-ended questions and 1,257 cleaned responses being analyzed in this case study.

The scope of this study was limited to only full-time, first-time undergraduates because this population represents traditional students entering college directly from high school. Although there is seldom a "traditional" student in higher education today, most college choice models are based on "traditional" student populations, representing freshmen students entering higher education directly after graduating from high school (Paulsen and St. John 2002).

## Data Analysis

After survey results were obtained, a content analysis strategy was employed to uncover findings about college choice decision-making. Content analysis is a qualitative research approach used to interpret meaning from text data through coding categories (Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Zhang and Wildemuth 2009). Qualitative content analysis allows researchers to classify large amounts of text data into like categories (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) and to find the contextual meaning of the text data through systemic classification, coding, and theming processes (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

A directed approach was used as theory and other research findings guided the initial analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). This structured approach to analysis uses existing theories and prior research to create a pri-

ori codes and categories, and then new codes can be developed when text cannot be categorized with existing categories (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Researchers using directed content analysis can look at the frequency and descriptive statistics of codes to find meaning within the qualitative data (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

Open ended-survey responses were coded with a hypothesis coding orientation using descriptive codes for the first-cycle coding and a second-cycle pattern coding method based on the college choice model by Hossler and Gallagher (1987) driving the study. Descriptive coding essentially considers a topic and uses a noun as a code to produce different categories throughout the qualitative analysis (Saldaña 2016). These descriptive codes were derived *a priori*, since student variables pre-existed from the literature review (Saldaña 2016). The second cycle coding process used pattern coding, as this style is often used to classify and synthesize first cycle coding and group previous codes together by identifying themes (Saldaña 2016). Pattern coding condenses large amounts of data into smaller quantities, allows for clarification of the data, and determines which categories and themes pertained to the research questions. (Saldaña 2016). The pattern codes were then interpreted based on frequency within the content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

## Findings

Various categories related to college choice emerged after analyzing the accepted student surveys, including academics, admissions office influence, athletics, physical campus, campus life, diversity, feeling, future career and goals, influence of others, location, money, reputation, and visit experience. When considering the four populations that were analyzed— females who enrolled, females who did not enroll, males who enrolled, and males who did not enroll—the most important variables to women who found Marathon University to be the right fit in their college choice decision-making process were affective in nature (Figure 1, on page 53). Not only did women who enroll indicate that their feelings toward the institution were important, but their written survey responses as they related to

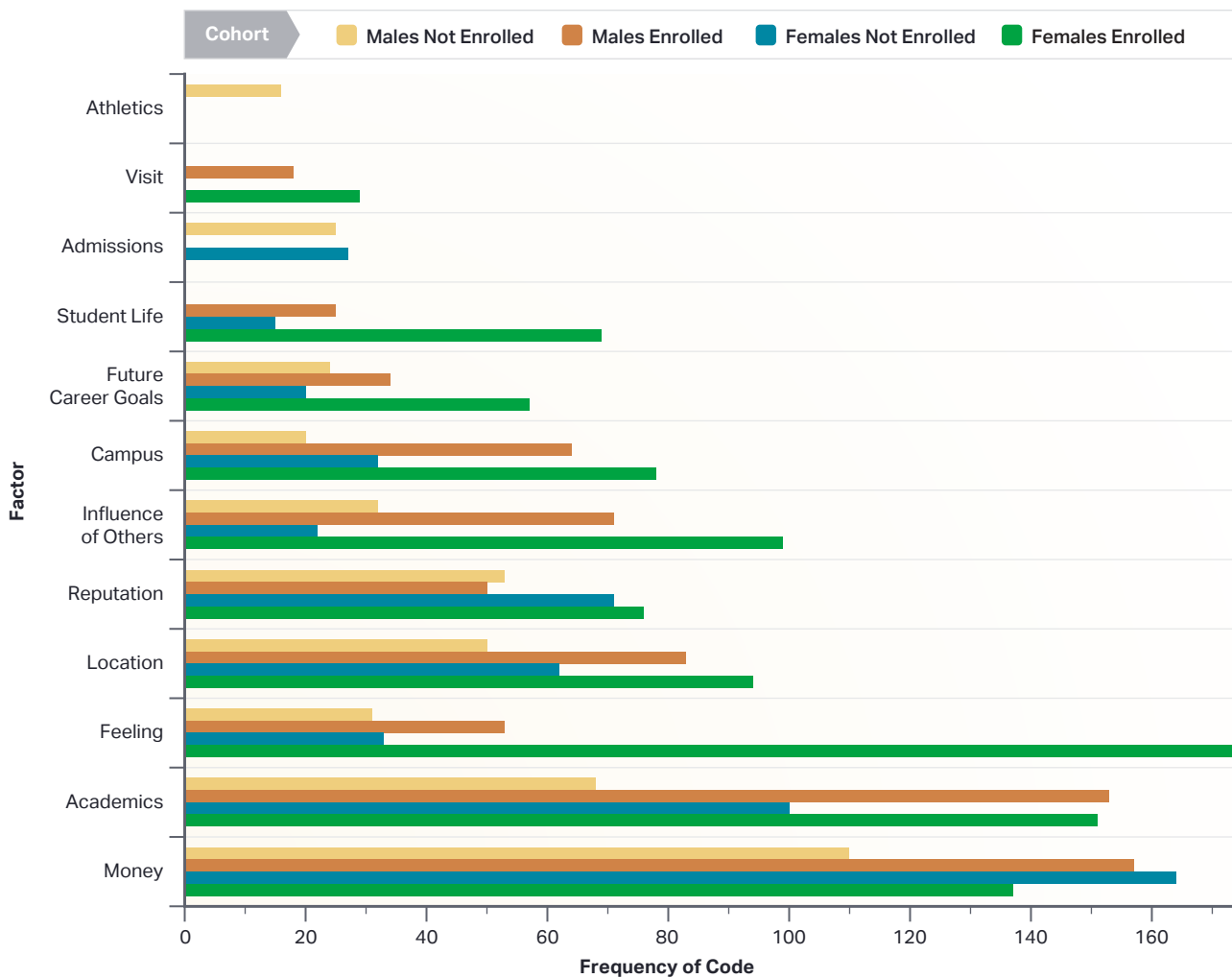
their feelings were far more pronounced, robust, and descriptive than responses related to other factors, or from other populations.

In addition to the feelings that women who attended Marathon University had, it is also important to note that each population put heavy emphasis on the value of cost and academic programs that the institution offered. Both men and women who enrolled indicated that the cost and academics positively influenced their decision, while both populations that did not enroll demonstrated negative responses to the cost and academic programs that were offered.

## Fit as Familiarity

Females who enrolled at Marathon University focused on their feelings during the college choice decision-making process more so than the other three student populations identified, including females who did not enroll, males who enrolled, and males who did not enroll. Women who enrolled at the university had a strong sense of connection toward the institution and felt comfortable, and that their choice was a good fit. It was important for female applicants to be able to feel a sense of fit and belonging, as another female who chose to enroll noted, “I felt very comfortable with the school and could see myself there for the next four years at least.” Women who enrolled valued this feeling over academic and financial considerations as seen in the other student populations, although they were still considerations when choosing to enroll or not enroll.

Female students who enrolled at Marathon University also indicated the feelings they had while visiting the campus and that it would be home for them. The notion of being or feeling at home permeated their responses, with a female who enrolled noting, “I like the feeling of the campus; it’s home. I wanna be successful while being comfortable.” Another woman who chose to enroll stated, “It felt right the first time I visited, and every time we would come to visit, I would get excited.” Additionally, female prospective students associated safety with feeling at home. One female wrote, “It’s a safe environment offering many things I am interested in. I am eager to learn here, make new friends and



**FIGURE 1** ➤ Comparison of Populations and Frequency of College Choice Decision-Making Factors Derived From Second Cycle Pattern Codes

memories within the next four years!” Another female applicant quoted in the survey:

*I choose Marathon University because I feel like I belong. I am very proud to be accepted by a school that's very high in ratings academically. I also love the campus and the surrounding town, it is absolutely gorgeous, and I would feel very safe and at home there.*

Having a sense of familiarity when walking around campus and associating that feeling with the notion of being at home was important for women who chose to enroll at Marathon University. When discussing these feelings toward the institution, women who enrolled

often expressed their responses more descriptively than the other population's responses. For example, one female who enrolled responded:

*Ultimately, I made the decision to attend Marathon University because it was a perfect fit for me. It is not too far from my home, the programs offered are well known, and I feel safe and comfortable in Marathon's environment. Of the colleges I visited, Marathon easily felt more like home than any of the others, and it is the only college I did not question feeling like I fit in. I am excited to attend Marathon and am certain I have made the right decision choosing Marathon University.*

Not only did women identify the need to feel safe, at home, and comfortable at the institution, but their responses overall reflected their expressive feelings related to familiarity of the campus.

## Fit as Family

In addition to their sense of home at the institution, feeling part of the Marathon University family was crucial for women who decided to attend the institution. Students were made to feel special, included, and valued by the institution through communication with the admissions office and university constituents. While feelings and sense of family with the institution were important to those who enrolled, conversely, students who did not have these same experiences or feelings did not see themselves as part of the Marathon University family and lacked familial connection and communication from the institution.

A female applicant who did not enroll stated that she “just didn’t get the same sense of connection that I did from other schools. Very little mail sent. Nothing personal/targeted toward me specifically. Even the acceptance letter was lacking bells and whistles.” Similarly another female applicant stated:

*The faculty at another institution were very involved and genuinely caring throughout the enrollment and decision process. The opportunities they’ve offered me are far superior to any other college I’ve applied to. Like, they sent me a gosh darn bouquet of flowers.*

Lack of communication with the institution and being made to feel special impacted another female applicant who did not enroll, and she acknowledged:

*Marathon was initially one of my top choices until the acceptance letter came. There was no effort made to make it special. I actually thought I didn’t get in because it came in a white envelope. All other acceptance packets I received were packets with great graphics, magnets, and pages of information. Once I received that one page letter, I never heard from Marathon again.*

In order to make a decision about there to attend college, this student wanted to feel that they were part

of the university family. Without relationship-building strategies implemented by the admissions office and other institutional stakeholders, female applicants chose to enroll at other institutions.

## Discussion and Recommendations

The findings of this study provide preliminary evidence that college choice decision-making may be impacted by gender, especially as it relates to the fit, feeling, sense of home, comfort, and connection to the institution. Not only did applicants who did and did not enroll at Marathon University indicate different variables that were important throughout the decision-making process, analysis also showed that female responses tended to be more affective overall compared to males, when discussing their decisions, especially when explaining the sense of connection they had with the institution.

When considering how students as consumers make decisions in the final stage of the college choice model (Hossler and Gallagher 1987), the findings align with Blackwell, *et al.*’s (2001) stages of selection, consumption, and post-consumption evaluation. Students are finding the need to attend college, searching for information about various schools, and then considering the different variables and features of each institution—all of which leads them to their ultimate selection or choice. The findings also support research that suggests women are more influenced than men by their parents, location, safety, and diversity of an academic campus (Bowden and Wood 2011; Hanson and Litten 1982; Shank and Beasley 1998; Wiese, *et al.* 2010). Most notable, these findings also reinforce that women value relationship formation when making a decision as a consumer and, therefore, are more susceptible to make a customer decision when there is a connection between themselves and the brand (Bowden and Wood 2011; Iacobucci and Ostrom 1993).

## Recommendations

Professionals in strategic enrollment management should note the importance of creating personalized communications and forming connections with incoming students, especially women. This finding is consistent with Bowden and Wood’s (2011) research on women

valuing relationship formation when making consumer decisions. Admissions counselors, marketing teams, and strategic enrollment management professionals have the ability to control communication plans and recruitment efforts with prospective students of both genders. The findings from this study reinforce how important it is during the college choice process to form meaningful relationships, be responsive, and make the prospective student feel special. It is troublesome to find that a student who considered Marathon University as a top choice chose not to attend because the institution did not make them feel special, especially when higher education professionals have the unique opportunity to create a meaningful and positive college choice decision-making experience for students. Strategic enrollment managers need to create personalized and specific communication plans and marketing efforts that will encourage students, especially women, to form a connection with the institution.

Strategic enrollment managers and admissions professionals should also consider the notion of safety as it relates to feelings of comfort, home, and sense of belonging for female applicants. Female students who are attending Marathon University noted that feeling at home and comfortable at the campus and surrounding area made them feel safe. Other research (Mansfield and Warwick 2006; Shank and Beasley 1998) has also found that safety of a college campus is an important variable in college decision-making for women compared to men; however, strategic enrollment managers often fail to note the significance when communicating with prospective students, especially women. Strategic enrollment management and marketing professionals should consider segmenting populations of students by gender and communicating with them about the variables that impact their decision-making, such as safety. Providing opportunities for women to feel at home, comfortable,

and safe on-campus before they reach the final stage of the college choice model may have a significant impact on the decision-making of these students and should not be ignored by strategic enrollment professionals.

Finally, most institutions in higher education conduct accepted student surveys and collect various types of data on their students. Secondary institutional data and survey results are typically available at any college and university, and new findings and conclusions can be made simply by asking different questions of the data. Accepted student surveys and their methodology could be improved across institutions to provide students the opportunity to be more specific, subjective, and descriptive when responding to accepted student surveys. The length of the surveys, the way questions are asked, and the actual outcome desired should all be considered when creating and distributing accepted student surveys. Best practices in survey design may assist strategic enrollment managers to identify why students choose to enroll or not enroll at their institution.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is imperative for strategic enrollment managers today to consider how gender impacts college choice decision-making. Although current research is limited, this study sought to gain understanding of women as consumers and their decision-making in higher education. Looking at how students value the notion of feelings, fame, and family with an institution can impact the way in which institutions make decisions and create strategies around recruitment and marketing initiatives for both men and women. Whether an institution has a majority of female students enrolling each year, or is an institution that sees the opposite trend, we need to begin thinking about strategic enrollment management from the perspectives of the consumer, especially our women students.

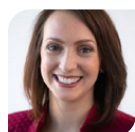
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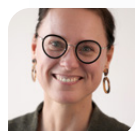
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